

Decentring the Subject: The Other

'The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of its civilisations and languages, its cultural constant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.' Edward Said

Said's book *Orientalism* first published in 1978 was a remarkable counter-blast to an age of Western triumphalism in the Middle East.ⁱ Said showed how Western perceptions of the Orient, in literature and anthropology, consistently overlaid the real geographical and social area described with images drawn substantially from the West's needs. At a time when not just hostile images, but also patronising stereotypes of the Orient stood in the way of a proper understanding between East and West, Said's book turned the tables on the Western intelligentsia and held them to account for their statements.

But beyond its influence as engaged criticism, Said's book also popularised the philosophical notion of 'the Other'. This capitalised adjective-turned-noun carries a surprising wealth of meaning. In the above from *Orientalism*, Said shows how the Orient, as Other to the West, defines the West. He means something like, 'all the negative features that the West see in the Orient are really just projections of its own fears'. Those things that we value we see as specifically Western, and, to make the point more forcefully, we find their opposite in the East. The negative images of the East serve to delineate what the West values in itself.

There is a fascinating example in *Orientalism* of how a change in Western self-perception demands an alteration in the description of the East, to fulfil its function as Other to the West. In much of the material that Said accumulates, drawn from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is a pointed stereotype of the East as licentious.ⁱⁱ As Said notes, 'for nineteenth-century Europe...there was no such thing as "free" sex'. Prurient Europeans projected what they feared (and desired) in their own society onto the Orient. Today, of course, the imaginary opposition of Eastern licentiousness and Western rectitude has been more or less inverted. Not in fact because of any change in the sexual mores of the East, but rather because the West has in the latter half of the twentieth century become sexually more liberal, the East appears, by contrast, to be sexually repressive. The imaginative transformation of the licentious East into the sexually repressive East is entirely independent of what actually happens there. Rather it is the expression of changing sexual manners in the West.

The explanatory power of the concept of the Other has led to its broad adoption in cultural and social criticism. So, for example, we have analyses of childhood as the Other of adulthood, nature as the Other of humanity, and, the most illustrious line, analyses of woman as the Other of man. Like all concepts, 'the Other' can illuminate, but it can also obscure meaning. Routine application of a received idea can become a barrier to thinking. Specifically in the case of the concept of the Other, as a consequence perhaps of its promiscuous reproduction in the social sciences, the unspoken presuppositions in the theory of the Other are rarely made explicit.

The development of the concept of the Other is a theoretical assault on the Subject. The Other describes the negation of subjectivity. Said acknowledges this when he says, with an attractive candour, 'because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action'.ⁱⁱⁱ Descriptively, that is a harsh, but broadly accurate judgement. For the greater part of modern history, the Orient has been dominated by the West, and has not been a free Subject of thought or action. However, Said puts the cart before the horse when he says that the reason is Orientalism. It would be more true to say that the intellectual outlook of Orientalism has taken hold because the Orient has been denied the status of a free Subject of thought or action. But the flaw in the theory of the Other, is that it tends to absolutise the opposition between the Self and its Other. Said's analysis of Orient as Other to the West, is telling because of the real subjugation of the East by the West. Even there, though, Said's approach tends to treat the relationship as one that is set in stone, as if the East could only occupy the position of Other to the West. Consequently, the account becomes repetitive, as if there were no modulations in the relationship. Pointedly the universalising moment in Enlightenment thinking, its optimism for a singular human family, is ignored or worse, assimilated into the romantic emphasis on the Otherness of the East.

The concept of the Other has been so woven into contemporary social and philosophical thought that it appears to be unremarkable, an ordinary part of the language. But this is a concept with an origin, and its origin is in Hegel's dialectic of Master and Slave as it was revised by French philosophers after the Second World War. It was from Hegel's account of the clash between Master and Slave that Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre took the categorical opposition of Self and Other and made it into an absolute. To understand the significance of this absolute opposition it will be helpful to trace the intellectual development of the theory of the Other – with the proviso that intellectual histories do not explain the contemporary appeal of the idea.

Hegel's dialectic of Master and Slave is a philosophical account of the emergence of the Subject. Hegel's predecessor Kant, tended to assume the existence of the

Subject and the potential for harmonious relations amongst Subjects, as in the formula 'be a person and respect others as persons'.^{iv} Hegel, by contrast, showed the emergence of the Subject as the outcome of a struggle that he idealised in the 'Master-Slave dialectic'.^v There are a great many subtleties to these passages in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but for present purposes, and at the risk of vulgarising, the relevant stages in the argument can be summarised in the following way.

Men meet on the battlefield in a struggle to the death. The victor in such an encounter, suggests Hegel, is the one who risks death – 'He who dares wins', as the British Special Air Service motto runs. In risking physical death, the victor has made an important step. For him honour is more valuable than mere animal subsistence. His selfhood is emerging as something higher, an ideal, realised in his new status as Master. The vanquished has preferred survival to honour and pays by being reduced to a slave, little more than a beast of burden.

Thus far, the clash has only produced Slave and Master in opposition. But Hegel intends to show how this relationship transforms its two terms. In the first instance the slave is the Other to the master, the Self. The slave makes himself the corporeal body of the master's will – 'your wish is my command'. However, the relationship is unsatisfactory for the master. He has domination over the slave. What he wanted, though, was honour, or recognition of his mastery. The love owed him by his slaves will never satisfy him, because it is not freely given. Furthermore, the master, having made himself master through action becomes lazy. Superficially it appears that he calls the shots. He snaps his fingers and the slaves come running to wait upon him. But already the slaves are, without realising it, the active parties. Their *labour* creates all the possibilities available to the court. If they would but realise the fact that they make everything happen, they would shake off the mantle of slave. Then they would cease merely to be the Other, and attain the character of Selves. Hegel describes the stages of consciousness that the slave goes through before getting knowledge of himself as a Self, as responses to the burden of servitude. First the slave decides to embrace his servitude manfully, in the attitude of a Stoic, taking pleasure in his labour. Second the slave shrugs off the external world of servitude, in the attitude of the Cynic, for whom mere existence is an illusion. Then the slave creates a spiritual realm of freedom, in the attitude of the Christian, who renders unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to God, that which is God's. Through this process the slave gradually withdraws his complicity in his own servitude making the transition from obsequiousness, through dumb insolence to establish freedom of conscience. This last is the preparatory stage to the demand for mutual recognition, or emancipation and civil rights. The fascinating aspect of the dialectic of the master and the slave is the way that Hegel gives the slave's consciousness the active role of developing full subjectivity and selfhood.

Consequently, Self and Other, in Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic are relative terms, not absolutes. The Other passes into selfhood. This is what marks out Hegel's original working up of the terms from the later interpretation that became current in France just before the Second World War.

Hegel achieves the relativisation of the Self-Other opposition by making both into expressions of the development of the Idea, or Spirit. In other words the different social positions that people occupy are not intrinsic to them. They are just vessels for the underlying spiritual development. By manifesting itself in these successive shapes – Master, Slave (stoic, cynic, Christian), mutually recognising selves – the Spirit develops and comes into consciousness of itself. This transformation of human history into the development of the Spirit is unconvincing to modern sensibilities, and certainly was in pre-war Paris. But Hegel, not yet published in French, had a useful interpreter in the Russian émigré Alexandre Kojève. The trend to secularise Hegel begins with Kojève's celebrated lecture series on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The most influential part of Kojève's telling of the Master-Slave dialectic was its secular, humanistic reinterpretation of Hegel's religious spirituality. Kojève 'read' Hegel to be describing the development of human institutions 'in the guise' of describing a spiritual progression. Where Hegel's book is a 'phenomenology of Spirit', Kojève's lectures describe an anthropogenesis.^{vi} In Kojève's version the subject is Man ('Man is self-consciousness'^{vii}), in Hegel's the subject is Spirit. We merely have to shed the arcane language of 'spirit' to understand Hegel's real humanistic message, Kojève is saying.

The difference between Kojève's anthropogenesis and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is this: Hegel relativises the independence of the self-consciousnesses as so many subordinate terms in the movement of Spirit. Hegel writes: 'What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is – this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition enjoy perfect freedom and independence.'^{viii} It is because the substance of the independent self-consciousnesses is Spirit that the different structures of consciousness, of Master and of Slave, can be superseded as merely intermediate manifestations of Spirit.

For Kojève, however, Spirit has been banished in favour of Man. What, then, allows 'the "dialectical overcoming" of both' Master and Slave? The corresponding concept to Hegel's Spirit (as substance of forms of consciousness) in Kojève is *society*: 'the human reality can come into being only as social reality', though 'society is human – at least in origin – only on the basis of its implying an element of Mastery and an element of Slavery'.^{ix} The nearest thing then to the over-arching concept of Spirit that could allow a movement beyond the entrenched positions of

Mastery and Slavery in Kojève is society. But this universal is underdeveloped, appearing to be little more than the reiteration of the clash of Master and Slave.

Kojève stripped out the Spirit to put Man in its place. His was a secular humanism, which shared something of Hegel's optimism. Later Hegel scholars shared Kojève's resistance to the Spirit, but were cautious, too of his humanism, thinking it shared something of the religiosity of Spirit. In principle though, whatever the subsequent differences, this one underlying project to strip spirituality out of Hegel is the enduring theme of Hegel scholarship in the period after the Second World War.

A dispirited Hegel, secularised and rendered more prosaic seems to fit our times. But there is a difficulty in re-reading Hegel in this way. The passage of the Spirit is fundamental to Hegel's phenomenology – it is the substance of which the forms of consciousness are the phenomena. Most pointedly, Spirit is the concept to which all other forms are subordinate. Hegel's method of relativising specific positions and stances depends upon their being partial, one-sided expressions of the over-arching totality of Spirit. The historical overcoming of these specific forms of consciousness and of being is only possible by virtue of these forms being made the subordinate clauses of the central proposition. Historical transition, the transcendence of each and every specific manifestation of Spirit is possible because they are only partial expressions.

Spirit as a concept might be out of keeping with our contemporary sensibilities. But without it, Hegel's historical movement stands in danger of being jettisoned. Unless a more prosaic substitute can fulfil the same goals of relativising contingent positions, then these must necessarily solidify into absolute polar opposites, without the possibility of being transcended. The forms of consciousness that in Hegel are merely staging posts on the way will ossify into insurmountable barriers. The antagonisms of Master and Slave will simply fall asunder into mutually exclusive oppositions without any possibility of their supercession. Alienation ceases to contain the possibility of its own overcoming, but is arrested at the point of mutual incomprehension and hostility. Roughly speaking, this is what has happened with the secularisation of Hegel's thought.

Once secularised in this way, Hegel made his most important bequest to twentieth century philosophy, the mutually defined concepts of Self and Other which are categories of the Master-Slave dialectic. The opening line of Hegel's account is 'Self-consciousness exists in and for *itself* when, and by the fact that, it so exists for *another*.'^x In the subjugation of Slave by Master 'there is posited a pure self-consciousness, and a consciousness which is not purely for itself, but for another....The former is lord, the other is bondsman.'^{xi} After Kojève the categories of Self and Other took on a life of their own first in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, and extending outwards to become the commonplace

terminology of a large body of social and philosophical writing. What is the meaning of this transformation of the Hegelian categories in the hands of these postwar French philosophers? We can say that the Master-Slave dialectic has been removed from its pseudo-historical context and made mundane. In the place of the historically specific relations of Master to Slave, we now have universal relations of Self and Other. The relations that in Hegel are projected back into a notional historical era prior to the emergence of civil society are dragged back into the present. Conflicts that in Hegel are elaborated in a fictional pre-modern era, are seen as resonating in the present. While the historical shell of lordship and servitude falls away, its inner content, the problematic and unsatisfactory relations of Self and Other, persist.

It was Simone de Beauvoir who first transformed Hegel's categories of Self and Other into the modern concept of the Other. For her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir is much praised as the first person to insist that one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman. 'The biological and social sciences no longer admit the existence of unchangeably fixed entities that determine given characteristics, such as those ascribed to woman, the Jew, or the Negro', she writes.^{xii} With such a non-biological approach one would think that the eternal status of woman is to be dislodged. But having downgraded the biological differentiation, De Beauvoir rehabilitates the opposition in as trenchantly enduring terms. 'The category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality - that of the Self and the Other.'^{xiii} 'Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself....Jews are "different" for the anti-Semite, Negroes are "inferior" for American racists, aborigines are "natives" for colonists, proletarians are the "lower class" for the privileged.'^{xiv} The biological differences between men and women are inserted into this eternalised psychological form: 'Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another.'

Jean-Paul Sartre followed de Beauvoir in elevating the Self-Other distinction into an absolute. He rejected Hegel's resolution, accusing Hegel of an 'ontological optimism',^{xv} which he explained as follows: 'Thus when Hegelian monism [ie, the monism of Spirit] considers the relation of consciousness, it does not put itself in any particular consciousness. Although the Whole is to be realised, it is already there as the truth of all which is true.'^{xvi}

Sartre is saying that in making Spirit the substance of the particular figures of consciousness from the outset, Hegel is smuggling the conclusion to the problem in at the beginning. Sartre answers Hegel: 'we should not... "surpass" the Other toward any inter-monad totality. So long as consciousnesses exist, the separation and

conflict of consciousnesses will remain.^{'xvii} In Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit must founder on the 'Reef of Solipsism', along with everyone else. Separation and conflict are an ever-present condition of the existence of consciousnesses. As Self and Other, Master and Slave are trapped in their conflict, and their mutual incomprehension for all time.

Sartre's unbridgeable opposition between Self and Other appeared to be radical in the face of the apologetic social pacifism of the postwar day. While government spokesmen and ideologues promoted an unproblematic harmony, Sartre's insistent problematisation of human relations pointed up the shortcomings. The embrace of the case for the Other took on a radical significance. So for example, the intellectual of the Algerian revolution Franz Fanon adapted Sartre's refusal of commonality to the conflict between Europe and Africa: 'The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity. Obedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic, they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity.'^{xviii}

But while the Self-Other opposition was radical in its rejection of ameliorative reforms, it does not readily lead to radical solutions either. Rather the whole point is that the Reef of Solipsism cannot be crossed. Self and Other are radically incommensurable. The tension is relocated from a specific and historically transient form of social organisation to the human condition itself. It cannot be overcome.

What the secularisation of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic achieves, then, is not finally a humanisation of Self and Other, even though it appeared to be that way. Rather it is the removal of the Subject from the Master-Slave dialectic. This is the case because Hegel's idealised Subject is the Spirit. And it is this Subject which overcomes the condition of Otherness. The elevation of the Other into the dominant principle is an effect of the demotion of the Subject. The theory of the Other is a degradation of the Subject. This much can be seen in the growing number of religious theories of the Other. These begin with the Hasidic theologian Martin Buber's radical opposition of Self and Other as 'I and Thou', an opposition that leads quickly 'toward the fringe of the eternal Thou; in each we are aware of the breath from the eternal Thou; in each Thou we address the eternal Thou'.^{xix} Paradoxically the excision of Hegel's religiously expressed subjectivity allows God to rush into the vacuum between Subjects, to become the eternal Other. In Buber's follower Emmanuel Levinas, we can again see the way that the elevation of the Other is in fact a demotion of the Subject. In his book *Outside the Subject* Levinas' essay 'The rights of Man and the rights of the Other' deploys the concept of the Other to circumscribe the 'egotism of a being persevering in its being'. Levinas elevates the notion of the absolutely other, which is "'more other'", so to speak, than are the individuals with respect to one another within the "same species" from which the *I* has freed itself'.^{xx} By this introduction of the big Other, the merely individual other is overshadowed, by God, in fact.

Like the concept of the posthuman, the elevation of the Other corresponds to a degradation of the Subject, which is in fact prior to it. The desire to relinquish the Self, leave the species, stop persevering in one's being are all essentially the same death-wish.

ⁱ *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991

ⁱⁱ *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient*, p 190 "Oriental sex was as standard a commodity as any other available in the mass culture'.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient*, p 3

^{iv} From Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morality*, quoted in Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, Cambridge: University Press, 1972, p137. Kant, though, was aware of some of the problems, as implied in his 'Fourth Thesis' of the 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent', where he writes 'I understand antagonism to mean men's unsocial sociability, i.e. their tendency to enter into society, combined, however, with a thoroughgoing resistance that constantly threatens to sunder this society' Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983, p32

^v 'Following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed - he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object.' Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, pref.

^{vi} Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991 p6

^{vii} Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p3

^{viii} GWF Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: University Press, 1977, p110

^{ix} Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, p8

^x GWF Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: University Press, 1977, p111 (emphasis added)

^{xi} GWF Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p115. The editors of the Miller edition of Hegel's *Phenomenology* do not capitalise the Other, but in Kojève's *Introduction*, Queneau does, thereby promoting it from adjective to noun

^{xii} De Beauvoir *The Second Sex*, pref

^{xiii} *The Second Sex*, pref

^{xiv} *The Second Sex*, pref

^{xv} Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966, p328

^{xvi} Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p329

^{xvii} Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p329

^{xviii} *Wretched of the Earth*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, p30

^{xix} Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, New York: Macmillan, 1987, p6

^{xx} Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, London: Athlone Press, 1993, p124

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